



## School Nutrition Briefs

As we navigate another year impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, school nutrition programs will need to be prepared for many contingencies. Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) encourages schools to have plans in place to ensure students have access to school meals no matter what this school year brings. However, there are a number of pressing issues facing school nutrition programs. Read this school nutrition brief to learn more about critical food distribution chain disruptions, procurement strategies, meal pattern waiver flexibilities and meals for students in blended learning.

### Food Supply Concerns and Procurement Strategies

Nationwide, the manufacturing and distribution industry is experiencing severe staffing and labor shortages as well as rising costs of materials and transportation. Those issues will trickle down to the school level in the form of contract cancellations, unanticipated food shortages, outages and substitutions, increased prices and reduced options. School Nutrition staff will have to make last-minute changes to regular menus based on food availability. We encourage you to prepare for food service budgets that are likely to rise throughout this school year.

Schools have options for addressing unexpected distribution or product availability disruptions. Using authority under [2 CFR 200](#), SFAs may conduct emergency “non-competitive” procurements to quickly replace unexpected contract gaps with alternative sources or products. The methods of procurement authority under [2 CFR 200](#) provides SFAs with the flexibility to conduct emergency noncompetitive procurement(s) when an urgent need or emergency arises, such as the need to replace missing foods or paper goods with alternative sources or products quickly. Emergency noncompetitive procurement methods are a standing flexibility and **do not require a waiver**.

If your nutrition program experiences canceled or reduced orders, consider purchasing smaller quantities of the product(s) through one or more local producers or small businesses instead of purchasing products in a single, large transaction through a broadline distributor. Leveraging local foods may help form new connections with small, local business and producers entering into the school nutrition market, which can help create a more resilient food system. In addition, consider developing a co-op with other districts to increase buying power with distributors. Read more about supply chain and procurement issues: [Planning for a Dynamic School Environment during School Year-2022: Supply Chain Issues | USDA-FNS](#)

In addition, it is imperative that schools communicate to families and students about the consequences of supply chain disruptions. Menus may not always reflect the items students are accustomed to. Lastly, students with special dietary needs need special attention if required food items are affected by supply chain disruptions. Please be sure to communicate with these families to discuss options.

## **Meal Pattern Waiver Flexibilities**

When a school is unable to safely follow meal pattern requirements due to supply chain issues related to COVID-19 or is unable to meet dietary specifications with available products, requesting meal pattern flexibilities is an option. For SY 2021-2022, USDA has issued two targeted nationwide meal pattern waivers ([USDA Waiver #100](#)) that provides flexibilities for select school meal pattern requirements and waives the requirement to take fiscal action for meal pattern violations. To receive these meal pattern flexibilities the school food authority must submit a [Meal Pattern Waiver Request for Schools – School Year 2021-2022](#) to MDE. Use this link to request specific flexibility for school meal patterns due to unanticipated food shortages, outages and substitutions. Waiver requests should be targeted and justified with a demonstrated need, based on plans to support access to nutritious meals while minimizing potential exposure to COVID–19. Requests must be for current needs rather than anticipated needs and submitted by the sponsor, not foodservice management/catering company contacts.

## **Meals for Students in Online Learning**

MDE recently released guidance for schools/districts that will be offering "Online and Blended Learning" opportunities for students. Students in Online Learning *choose* to receive 100% of their instruction virtually and do not regularly come into the school building to receive instruction. USDA prohibits 100 percent online schools from participating in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs as well as the Seamless Summer Option (SSO). For school year 2021-22, students participating in 100 percent online programs may receive meals from sites that are open to serving meals to all children.

## **Meals Blended Learning**

Students who *choose* to participate in blended learning receive part of their instruction in a supervised school building and part time through digital delivery of instruction. These students must be allowed to participate in school meal programs on the days they are receiving instruction in the school building. The USDA non-congregate dining and meal time waivers *allow* schools to provide meals to blended learning students when they are receiving online instruction. The use of these waivers for the online portion of blended learning is at the discretion of the local educational agency (LEA). MDE encourages

schools to make meals available to blended learners, to the extent possible, on days they are receiving instruction virtually. During online learning, meals could be provided to blended learning students by allowing them to eat in the cafeteria, pick up meals from a designated site or sending meals home with students during an on-site instructional day.

## **Meals for Students that are in Quarantine or are Learning from Home due to COVID Related Closures - Updated**

[UPDATED 10/1/2021]: When there are cases or exposures that *require* students to temporarily shift to online learning at a student, class, grade, school, or LEA-wide level, participating districts and charter schools **are expected to** continue to provide access to meals. These meals could be picked up from designated sites, delivered to homes.

Read more about [Planning for a Dynamic School Environment during School Year-2022: Flexibilities in Practice | USDA-FNS](#)

Don't hesitate to [contact us](#) if you have any school meal program related question.